

In the Moonshine Belt Where Every Clump of Bushes Hides A Still

Only Lack of Organization on the Part of Illicit Distillers Permits Law and Order Forces to Assert Themselves with Some Degree of Success

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER all points are considered the conclusion must be drawn that the war between the moonshiners and the officers is an unequal war. The advantage lies on the side of the moonshiners. "Much is being done to thwart the distillers of corn—about as much, in fact, as could be expected of the number of raiders assigned to patrol the mountains of the Southern States—but it seems the officials intrusted with the enforcement of the prohibition law in the "moonshine belt" cannot destroy stills as fast as they can be replaced. Clearly, this is progress in the wrong direction.

Yet, literally thousands of cases involving violation of the prohibition act are pending in the courts of the mountainous counties and districts of the States of Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina and Kentucky. There are nearly a hundred such cases awaiting trial in the Wise County Circuit Court, at Big Stone Gap, Va., the home of the late John Fox, Jr., author of mountaineer fiction. And at Marion, Va., county seat of Smyth county, there are as many. The same is true in Washington county, of which the county seat is Abingdon, where seventy-five cases were on the docket during the last term of court. Such is the situation in all the courts of all the counties of the "moonshine belt." But—a very small percentage of these cases are for moonshining. Most of them are for transporting and storing, and the source of the liquor remains not only undammed but also on a progressively increasing status.

Unequal as the warfare is, it would be far more so if the moonshiners had a concentrative organization of any sort. If they could organize themselves they could hold their hills for a thousand years; but such organization is, of course, impossible. The mountaineers are scattered as the hills are scattered, and the moonshiner's game is a lone one. He can have his own little group, usually relatives, who will fight in case of a surprise attack by raiding officials, but the moonshiner's neighbors—moonshiners themselves—will not help except to give warning.

Youths Most Dangerous

Types of the Moonshiners.

Veterans in the thrilling game of hunting stills declare the most dangerous type of moonshiner is the youth between 16 and 22 years of age, who is assisting his father in the business. They explain that the boy hears his elders make drunken boasts and dire threats against the "revenuers." These remarks are taken at their literal value, when most of the time the old moonshiner is only "blowing off a little steam and trying to appear bad." But when the raid comes the youth, acting under the conviction that his folks will shoot the affair out with the "revenuers," seizes a rifle or pistol and makes ready to do his share. The fact is that the old men, if not too drunk, in most cases take the less dangerous way out, running, surrendering and giving combat only when to their minds there is no remaining alternative.

Frequently it is found that an outlaw who has committed crimes elsewhere has taken to the mountains as a home and moonshining as a livelihood, excitement or safety from the law's anger for those former misdeeds. There are many of these characters in the Great Smoky Mountains, Iron Mountains, Stone Mountains and Bald Mountains, on the Tennessee-North Carolina border. Their preference for this district is that they have the advantage of being in a position to retreat across a range or two in another State if the officers of one State come after them.

These men will fight if interfered with. Without reference to their crimes in other parts there are few who will fail to concede that these transplanted moonshiners should be trailed out and returned to justice. They have absolutely no scruples about making whisky. They doctor it with any poison available in order to give it power before its natural time.

It has been reported for months that a number of these outlaws are banded together in a section of the Iron Mountains in the vicinity of Magnetic City, Mitchell county, N. C., near where Harsell is believed to have been shot to death, and that they have openly defied the authorities to come after them. Another band is said to be fortified in the mountains of Avery county.

The fact is that all sorts of people have gone to the mountains and taken up moon-

shining. It is not unbelievable that there are more moonshiners in the mountains now than there were mountaineers before prohibition. The flood of liquor that will sweep down soon will convince all those who are in any position to attempt estimates that almost numberless men are engaged in the manufacture of liquor from corn. Unquestionably moonshine whisky is the principal corn product now.

Most observers say that the raiders have had the situation as well in hand during the winter as was possible, considering the limited number of the many obstacles. The peak of production will be reached about the first of May. Stills will bloom in every cove—three where only one blossomed before—and the sale of fruit jars, cornmeal and copper will jump, while the price of whisky will drop.

It must be said to the credit of the mountaineer that he is more agriculturally inclined than he was before prohibition. He is a farmer now on rather a large scale and corn is his crop, whereas three or four years ago he raised only enough corn to insure his family a supply of corn pones for the year and to insure himself a sufficient quantity of corn juice to keep the pangs of sobriety away.

Thirty-five or forty bushels of corn to the acre is a fine average for a mountain crop. Such a yield is good for about seventy-five gallons of good quality moonshine. It is a fact that mountaineers, talking over affairs with each other, invariably predict crop prospects in units of gallons rather than bushels.

To get back to the mountain outlaws of Mitchell and Avery counties. Among these outcasts who make liquor, rob farmers and fight among themselves was Johnnie Green, slayer of three men, who was electrocuted at the State prison in Nashville, Tenn., last February. The crime for which he was executed was the murder of Robert Houston at his home near Watauga, Washington county, Tennessee. The murder occurred last July. Green simply walked past the house where Houston was reclining on a couch in the front room and shot through the door.

After shooting Houston three times Green ran out the front door and escaped. Mrs. Houston, who was in the rear of the house, heard the shots, seized a rifle and ran to the front door, shooting several times at the murderer as he ran. Just before he disappeared from sight over a knoll Green turned and waved at Mrs. Houston.

For weeks officers scoured the hills in a vain search for Green. Later it was learned that he was a member of a well organized gang of moonshiners and cutthroats in the Bald Mountains of the Tennessee-North Carolina State line. Another member of the same gang was Curley Bill Hayden, murderer and moonshiner.

After spending about four months in the seclusion and safety of the hills Green ventured out and was seen twice near the scene of the Houston murder. A high reward was offered for him. But he was not captured by the officers who were seeking him. He was picked up one day by the police of Knoxville, Tenn., in the Southern Railway yards. The officers had no idea who he was. He was arrested as a vagrant and was confined for thirty days in the Knoxville jail. After he had been in the jail for about two weeks he was identified as Johnnie Green, slayer of Houston.

He confessed, and added that he had cut another man to death several years ago when they were working together on a threshing machine. He was sought for this murder, he said, and that explains why he went to the mountains. Later he killed a policeman in Johnson City and was sent to the penitentiary for four years. He returned to the mountains after his release and joined a gang of outlaws, who, according to his description, are as villainous a band as ever practiced malicious doings in the most tawdry serial movies of a decade ago.

In his confession Green said that the bandit band of which he was a member



One of the elaborate stills found under ground on a mountain side. The pipe leads up for almost sixty feet before it reaches the air. Officers searched the hillside in the immediate neighborhood for a year before they finally located the hiding place. The men in the photograph are Federal raiders at last in possession of the long sought still.

had decreed that Houston and another man should die and that he had been assigned the job of committing the murders. But after he had slain Houston the pursuit grew so warm that he did not get around to the other fated victim.

Bands of outlaws are not the rule among moonshiners. As has been said, there is no consistent type of moonshiner now as there once was. Men of all sorts and natures have gone into the business. As a general thing there is no definite organization of outlawry such as that exemplified by the band of which Johnnie Green was a member. Among the "more law abiding" and less sinister minded moonshiners the situation is governed by the old jargon of "every man for himself and the Devil take the hindmost." But that attitude in itself effects a tremendous organization, for best results—from a financial point of view—are obtained by coordination of moonshiners, whisky runners and "bootleggers."

Prohibition Enforcement Not Making Much Headway.

Staff officials, who sit back in swivel chairs and announce to an eager country that prohibition enforcement regulations are steadily growing better and that there is some promise of the complete extermination of the moonshiner, are not at all in concord with many of the field men whose duties carry them into positions where they obtain first hand knowledge of affairs in the mountains.

Claims that enforcement in the "moonshine" belt is steadily gaining ground are laughed at, for example, by Claude F. Beverly of Freeling, Va., the first Federal prohibition agent assigned to the territory comprising the hills of southwest Virginia and east Tennessee. Beverly served as en-

forcement officer in Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee. In the summer of 1920 he was sent to Montana to aid in organization of the enforcement unit there. He retired from the service last summer.

In a written statement issued recently Mr. Beverly says:

"Violation of the prohibition laws was never more open, never more flagrant, and were it not for the fact that business in the coal fields and lumber mills is depressed and that those who would patronize the moonshiners liberally are now without funds conditions would be appalling.

"Conditions are steadily growing worse instead of better. Courts throughout southwest Virginia are congested with cases pertaining to the prohibition laws and new circuits are being formed by the present Legislature to relieve the situation. In the border counties practically all of the court sessions are taken up with these cases. Raiding officers now prosecute nearly all cases in the State courts. Offenders are usually given sentences of from thirty days to six months at hard work on the roads and fined from \$50 to \$500."

In preceding chapters of this series it has been shown that moonshining and encounters with moonshiners are none the less picturesque because of the great numbers who have gone into the "business." There are still battles, ambushes, attacks as the day breaks, running skirmishes with revolvers and all that go to make up the usual mountain picture of the movies. But the movies make the mountaineer and the moonshiner good to look at; this series has endeavored to show

Above—One of the Federal raiders, Thomas J. Maxey, who has braved many of the dangers which have cost countless other men their lives. To left—A moonshiner and his family. The men do not feel that they are violating any law in making whisky.

him as he is—gaunt, grim, sensitive to danger, a killer of men. He is not pretty. Neither are his works, but there remains about him an atmosphere that brings into the raiding service young men who have returned from the war and who still seek excitement and danger. A large percentage of the raiding officials are men who saw service in France. There is a fascination about the mountaineer that will, probably, never disappear.

Incidentally, the war exerted an influence upon the moonshiner himself. For one thing it altered his technique in many an instance. The art of camouflage as utilized in the war to conceal artillery emplacements have been put to use since by moonshiners in their effort to conceal stills. An instance where the stills were camouflaged may be cited in a recent raid made by Sheriff Camp of Davidson county, Tenn., in which Nashville, the capital of the State, is situated, only a few miles from the city. He and six deputies made this raid in the night, shooting one moonshiner, capturing two others and confiscating three stills of a hundred gallons capacity. Over the rather extensive territory in which the three stills were set was spread great strips of canvas, painted to blend in color with the trees and the earth about. Moreover, the canvases were excellently done.

Volstead Enforcers Are Handicapped by Law.

In Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina officers cannot stop and search a car unless armed with a warrant which bears the name of the automobile's driver. This handicap to the enforcement of the Volstead act has been removed in Virginia, however, through the enactment of legislation permitting the authorities to halt and search cars on suspicion.

One of the most crafty moonshiners of the mountain country, George Neff, a veteran of the business in the Cumberland mountains, contrived a tank which was suspended from the under part of his automobile. His car was stopped and searched five times within a week; the officers had positive information that he was making a "drive."

"Nary a drop of liquor in this here car," he would tell the officers; and then afterwards, to his friends, he would say with a sly grin: "Well, I didn't lie to 'em. The stuff wasn't in the car; it was under it."

The tank held about forty gallons, and the whisky was distributed to Bluefield, Roanoke or Bristol after trips averaging about 100 miles each. This was George's

Above—A typical home in the moonshine belt. "Bill" Haggerty, who lives in this cabin, has been one of the most elusive of the moonshiners in the entire district.

practice until shortly after Christmas, when one evening about dusk two officers stopped Neff on the road between Pulaski and Abingdon. He was headed in the direction of his stills, having disposed of his supply, so he was not greatly concerned when the officers began without delay an examination of the under part of his machine.

"What's this contraption under here?" one exclaimed.

"That!" rejoined Neff contemptuously. "That's one of them new fangled gas tanks. Ain't you-all never seen one of them before?" He laughed easily.

An inspection found it was empty.

"You'd better be careful about using that thing again," one of the deputies warned him, as they turned away. "You're plumb lucky this time."

Neff stood in the road watching the officers get into their car. His nonchalant bearing had vanished, and there was a serious glint in his watery blue eyes.

"Say," he began, "I ain't tryin' to bribe you, understand, but I'd give fifty dollars to know who told you."

There was a vague report—but a plausible one—several weeks ago that runners had evolved a new scheme for getting whisky from the Blue Ridge Mountains to Washington and that Blue Ridge "corn" had become the favorite of many thirsty folk in the national capital. According to the story, the plan succeeded admirably for many months and might still be succeeding. Some moonshiner with a long head figured that officers would not suspect anything wrong and would not get curious about an automobile on the front seat of which were sitting a man and a woman in tourist attire. So it was that the rather expensive car with a smartly clad young couple on the front seat managed to run hundreds of gallons into Washington. The car is said to still be making regular trips.

The daily and hourly activities of the revenue officers have been told of in considerable detail. There are happenings in the mountains day by day that are more interesting than the sheerest and most imaginative fiction written. There are bases for tremendous stories behind thousands of incidents involving officers and moonshiners.

Boy Reveals Location of Long Sought "Big Still."

Not long ago, after investigating a dozen hollows without finding a trace of a still, a party of riders composed of Federal Agents R. L. Elliott and David Dettor and Sheriff John M. Litton and Deputy Sheriff E. L. King came to a mountain cabin on the side of a spur of White Top Mountain near Alvarado in the southeastern part of Washington county, Va.

A youth of about 13 years of age watched with deep interest as the officers climbed the little rising hill in front of the cabin. "Howdy," he said cordially when they were within hearing distance.

"Hello, son," Litton responded, "can you tell us where we can find some water to drink?"

"Yep; follow me down t'spring. Best water in the world thar."

At the spring, a short distance from the cabin, the four officers slaked their thirst while the lad stood by carefully studying every movement they made. He wore faded overalls, a torn, brown coat, a cap with earmuffs, and cheap, heavy soled, clay caked shoes. In keeping with a common and almost invariable characteristic of the mountaineer, he stood with his hands thrust under the bib of his overalls. "He looks like a bright little fellow," said Litton to Elliott. "I believe I'll ask him if he knows anything about any stills around here."

"Boy, are there any stills in this part of the country?"

The child's interest quickened perceptibly. "Be you-all revenuers?" he asked with considerable show of excitement.

"Why, yes; in a way," Litton answered, not knowing what the lad's reaction would be. "We're looking for stills in this neighborhood."

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